The Power and Meaning of the Christian Worldview

Edward McCormack

Many Catholics today are far more familiar with the stories, symbols, and values told and sold by corporate America than we are with those of the Bible. Using the doctrine of Creation as a focal point, McCormack illustrates how pastoral ministers can restore, renew, and enliven the Catholic imagination by engaging the rich images of the biblical narratives.

Anyone who works in ministry today understands how difficult it can be to pass on our Christian faith to others. In his recent book, Secularity and the Gospel, Ronald Rolheiser describes our secular Western culture as the new missionary field. Over the last one hundred years or so secular culture has dismissed Christianity as irrelevant to real-world issues such as economics or politics. It has charged Christianity with being the cause of many conflicts. In intellectual circles, religion has been treated as superstition or at best a private, individualistic affair. Often in popular culture, it is belittled, stereotyped, or simply absent. In this cultural climate many Christians find it difficult to share their faith even with friends, family members, and their own children.

Perhaps the most important suggestion Rolheiser makes for evangelizing in our secular culture concerns the role of the Christian imagination (Rolheiser, 19–22). Under the influence of secular culture, the Christian imagination has withered. We are far more familiar with the stories, symbols, and values told and sold by corporate America than we are with those of the Bible. Throughout the last century, scholars have helped the church to understand the biblical, theological, and liturgical foundations of our faith. But what often seems to be missing in our proclamation of the Gospel and in our churches is a fire and passion for our faith.

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In this climate, the church needs to water and feed the imagination of Christians by promoting a deep and personal understanding of the Christian worldview. When I speak of imagination, I do not mean daydreaming and fantasy. I understand imagination to be the ability to enter into the world opened up by the biblical narrative so one can be formed and transformed by that world. This practice allows us to locate our lives within the Christian story and interpret our world in terms of it. For too long Christians have located their lives and interpreted their world through the story told by modernity with its promise of technology, democracy, and education along with consumption as the means to salvation and meaning for our world. This story promotes a superficial, soulless culture that distracts us from the hopelessness and meaninglessness it promotes. It is time we learn to understand and evaluate our lives and world in terms of the Christian story by listening to it in a new way. Often we listen to our story as disinterested observers of an ancient tale, forgetting that it is our story. It is here that the Christian imagination can play an important role in our spiritual journey. By tapping into our capacity to enter the world of the biblical narrative we can begin to live out of it. By feeding the Christian imagination once again, the church can direct the energy and desires of Christians in service to Christ.

The Christian Worldview

What do I mean by a worldview? A worldview is the assumed model of reality through which a society understands and interprets the world. It is like an invisible map through which we perceive reality. Every worldview, including the Christian worldview, is expressed through a foundational story, a set of symbols, practices, and beliefs. In the case of the Christian worldview, it offers a powerful interpretation of the world and a comprehensive vision of life by reminding us of what God has done in the world, what God is doing, and what God will do. It also helps us to locate the joys and struggles of our personal story within the larger Christian drama, thus, giving it a meaning and purpose in terms of Christ and his mission.

A full-scale presentation of the Christian worldview is not possible here, so I will confine myself to setting out some of the biblical foundations of our worldview. Since the imagination is best captured by story, I will set out our foundational story and then proceed to highlight the following four beliefs that emerge from that story: God’s creation, God’s creation under attack, the risen Jesus and God’s new creation, and the communal and personal participation in God’s new creation. In my discussion of these four beliefs I will draw particular attention to the presence and work of God the Creator in our lives, God’s new creation in Christ, and the eschatological character of the Christian life. I am convinced that attention to these elements of our story can aid in bringing the Christian imagination back to life.
Our Foundational Story

The power and meaning of the Christian worldview comes from our foundational story, which is based on the overarching narrative of the Bible. This narrative, from Genesis through Revelation, is a story about creation and new creation that can be told in five acts. Thus: (1) Creation, (2) the Fall, (3) Israel, (4) Jesus, and (5) the Church (Wright 1992, 141–43).

Let me briefly flesh out the five parts of our story. In part one, God creates a good and beautiful world in which human beings are created in the image of God with the responsibility of reflecting God's love for the world by acting as wise stewards of creation. In part two, the story quickly turns tragic when humanity rebels against God and rejects its vocation to image God by worshiping themselves or other creatures rather than God. Into God's beautiful world come anticreational and anti-human forces that seek to deface and destroy it. Part three recounts God's efforts to rescue humanity and all creation from these forces by calling Abraham and Israel to be the light of the world. When Israel fails at this task the prophets, especially Isaiah, express the hope that one day God will act to rescue the world from tyrants, injustice, and death by creating a new world of justice and peace where God's people are restored and creation renewed. In part four, God finally acts to rescue and renew all things through Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. Part five begins with the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. These events signal the beginning of God's new creation and the birth of the church. The climax of the story is the creation of a new heaven and a new earth with restored humanity living in loving communion with God and each other in God's new creation.

God's Creative Love

The belief that the triune God is the Creator of the world is the fundamental starting point for the Christian worldview. Our worldview does not begin with an emphasis on sin, but with an understanding of the generosity of God who creates a good world and calls humanity to play an important role in that world. It speaks of a God who loves us and whose gifts should evoke in us a deep sense of gratitude and a desire to serve God.

This conviction is contrary to much of contemporary culture. Enlightenment deism reduced God's creative activity to an event of the past, thus disconnecting the Creator from our present lives by depicting God as an absentee landlord who has created the world and left it on its own. Such an understanding of creation diminishes our appreciation of the abundant generosity of God and of God's abiding presence in all things. Perhaps this is why many people seem to be out of touch with the passionate love of God that burns in our hearts and in the core of all...
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These cultural influences distort the way Christians understand our belief in God the Creator. We must recover a fuller understanding of this belief by taking into account the following three ideas. First, beginning with Genesis 1, the Bible teaches that God creates through God’s Word and God’s Spirit. God’s creative activity is not confined to an event of the past, because all creatures remain in existence only as long as the Spirit of God remains in us. “If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and all mortals return to the dust” (Job 34:14-15). In other words, God is constantly creating the universe, our world, all humanity, you and me, from moment to moment. At every moment, God’s creative love is coursing through the core of all things. “How could a thing remain, unless you willed it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you. But you spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord and lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things” (Wis 11:25–12:1). For each person this means that at every moment of life God has always been involved and is always involved. It is the creative energy of God that is constantly creating me, my loved ones, friends, and the entire natural environment that makes my existence possible. God, therefore, is not like a city I journey toward, but the all-embracing mystery whose presence constantly sustains me and all that surrounds me (Tetlow, 4–5, 23–24).

Second, the first two chapters of Genesis present God as the source of all the good in the world. God is the giver who gives generously, abundantly, and endlessly. It is through these gifts of the earth, life, food, family, and friends that God loves us. God has created a good and beautiful world for us to enjoy and care for. We are made to delight in the beauty of creation, the joy of friendship, and to take pleasure in the gifts God has given us whether it is in the arts or athletics. This insight challenges our take-it-for-granted culture to appreciate the fundamental gift character of our world. It calls all Christians to cultivate an ever deepening awareness that all the good in their lives is a gift from God.
Third, God the Creator calls all human beings to be God’s image bearers (Gen 1:26). This fundamental vocation gives all human beings a built-in dignity that is more fundamental than race or gender. It means that every human being is called to reflect God’s wise and loving stewardship in the world by care for each other and all creation.

The practice of gratitude is perhaps the most direct way this fuller understanding of our belief in God the Creator can begin to influence the Christian imagination. This prayer practice will teach us that our world and our lives come from the Creator God who is the source of all the good in our world and our lives (Leddy 2002, 38–69).

**God’s Creation under Attack**

The Christian worldview challenges us to recognize that God’s beautiful world is under attack by forces that seek to destroy it. These forces are opposed to the creative and renewing work of the Trinity in our world. Our biblical and theological tradition does not offer an explanation for the presence of evil. Evil is not a problem that can be solved, but a mysterious and destructive force whose influence we must acknowledge and resist. Since evil blinds us and seduces us, we can only see its influence and resist it through the presence of Christ and the light of the Holy Spirit.

While Christians have always had a sharp sense of sin and evil, it has often been thought of in terms of private acts. The church needs to train the Christian imagination to recognize the social and interpersonal dynamics of sin in our world. This social and interpersonal understanding of sin challenges the Christian imagination to recognize to what extent as a society and as individuals we have participated in this condition and need God’s freedom.

The sea is the biblical symbol for the dark and chaotic forces in our world that seek to deface and destroy God’s creation. This symbol conveys the power these forces have to overwhelm a nation, village, or family. These are anticreational and antihuman forces that contaminate every dimension of society throughout human history. They are anticreational because they seek to destroy all that God brings into being. They are antihuman because they infect all dimensions of society with injustice, corruption, and violence. In the Bible, these forces take the form of wicked empires and wicked rulers or unjust, oppressive, and violent social systems (Wright 2006, 43–50). Today these same forces promote racism, sexism, corporate greed, government corruption, and state-sanctioned torture.

The Christian worldview challenges us to recognize that these same forces, which we traditionally call sin, are at work in our own lives and within each of us. For St. Paul in particular, sin is an enslaving force that distorts and ruptures relationships. It distorts our relationship with God by tempting us to worship
creatures rather than the Creator or by tempting us to rebel against God and act as if we were a god. Sin undermines our ability to be God's image bearers and wise loving stewards by distorting and rupturing our relationships with other people and with ourselves. It also leads us to exploit God’s beautiful world rather than care for it.

There is good news in the midst of this story. The biblical narrative tells us that God’s fundamental project is to rescue and renew all humanity and all creation from all the anticreation and antihuman forces in our world. God has chosen to rescue humanity from these forces by working from within humanity, first by calling Abraham and then by calling Israel to be the light of the world. Israel's story tells of a mixed response to her vocation, but her prophets never lost hope in God's project. It was the prophets who spoke during and after the Babylonian exile who expressed in a powerful fashion the hope that God the Creator would rescue and restore humanity and all creation. They acknowledged that the present age was dominated by sickness, suffering, tyranny, and death. Yet they believed that one day God would act again just as God did in the Exodus and at creation to bring about a new exodus and a new creation (Wright 2006, 52–74).

The prophets of the exile, especially Isaiah, expressed the hopes of Israel in the following manner: First, Israel hoped God would renew the covenant and restore them as a nation (Isa 40:1-5; 37:1-14). This meant national forgiveness and the outpouring of God's Spirit on all God's people (Ezek 36:24-28). Second, they hoped God would defeat the forces that enslave, distort, and destroy God’s good creation, which for them were represented by the pagan world (Isa 25: 6-9; 35:1-10). Third, when Israel was renewed, then all humanity and all creation will be renewed (Isa 41:17-19; 65:17-18; Ezek 47:1-12) and God's justice and peace would reign. Fourth, when these things happened God would return to dwell in Jerusalem and rule the world as king (Ezek 43:1-5; Isa 25: 6-9).

**The Risen Jesus and God’s New Creation**

The person of Jesus, his kingdom ministry, death, and resurrection are at the heart of the Christian worldview. It is here, above all, that the church needs to feed the Christian imagination the food of the New Testament’s understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection and what they mean for our lives.

After Jesus' death, the early Christians made the startling claim that in Jesus crucified and risen all God's promises to Israel had been fulfilled. “All God’s promises, you see, find their yes in him” (2 Cor 1:20). They believed that through his crucifixion and resurrection, God has finally acted to rescue all humanity and all creation from the forces of chaos, sin, and death. Jesus’ death was not a sacrifice to appease an angry God, but the climax of his battle with evil. He defeated evil
by entering into the forces of injustice, violence, and sin that plague our world and absorbing their power (Col 2:14-15; 1 Cor 2:7-10). His death was God's judgment on all the anticreation and antihuman forces in the world. His resurrection was God's victory over these forces because in Jesus, God has reversed and transformed the effects of death. As the risen one he is now living a transformed bodily existence. Through his resurrection, God's new creation has broken into our world. He is now the free one through whom God is freeing humanity and all creation (Wright 1997, 45–46).

What does his death and resurrection mean for us? For generations, Christians thought Jesus' death and resurrection meant God had offered us a way to heaven. The New Testament, however, tells us that through his resurrection God is creating a new heaven and a new earth, rather than offering us a way to heaven (Rev 21:1). Reflection on John 20:19-23 will help me explain that claim. This passage opens with the disciples hiding in a locked room out of fear that the Jewish leadership and the Roman army were looking for them. The risen Jesus appears to them offering peace, showing them his hands and his side, breathing on them the Holy Spirit, and sending them out to forgive others.

The risen Jesus is presented by John as the source of God's new creation that will one day liberate and renew the entire created order. John conveys this by pointing out that Jesus appeared to the disciples on the first day of the new week of the new creation. In John's Gospel, Jesus' resurrection is the first sign of the new creation. Jesus breathing on the disciples recalls Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37:9. Just as God breathed on Adam at the first creation, so Jesus breathes on the disciples, initiating the creation of God's new world. In this scene, Jesus initiates the liberation and recreation of the world for the disciples by freeing them from their fear, turning that fear into joy, and offering the peace of God's new world (Brown, 1033–37).

John also teaches us that the gift of the Holy Spirit is the key to living out of God's new creation in the present world. For John, the Spirit is the personal presence of the risen Christ who guides the disciples from the Cross to God's new creation. The indwelling Spirit empowers the disciples to share in the power and life of the risen Jesus. It is through the Spirit that the disciples have a relationship with Christ and share in God's new creation (Brown, 1135–43). It is the Spirit who witnesses to Christ, reminds Jesus' disciples of his ways, and glorifies Christ in and through his disciples (John 15:26; 16:13-14).

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Saint Paul also maintains that the Holy Spirit is essential for living the Christian life. For him the Spirit is the personal presence of God who now dwells in the church and within each Christian. “Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16). The resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit were the evidence that God’s future world had broken into the present. The Spirit is the down payment on our future inheritance (Eph 1:4) and the firstfruits of the coming harvest (Rom 8:23). These images present the Spirit as the future life of God given to us in the present (Fee, 49–62). It is through the indwelling Spirit that Christ sets us free from the enslaving forces of this world (Gal 4:1-7). It is also through the indwelling Spirit that we become a new creation. The fruits of the Spirit such as love, joy, peace, and patience are signs God’s new creation has begun to bloom in us (Gal 5:22-25).

Communal and Personal Participation in God’s New Creation

According to the Christian worldview, Christ calls us to communal and personal participation in God’s new creation. When we speak about the church, we must emphasize the eschatological nature of the church if we are to capture people’s imaginations. This does not mean that the church is a community waiting for the rapture. It means the church is a new and unique kind of community created and sustained by the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit who dwell within the church and guide it. The church is an international institution. The church is hierarchical and its leadership is male dominated. But first and foremost, the church is a new creation. It is a new kind of community living out of the power and values of God’s future world within the present world (Fee, 63–72).

This has important implications for the Christian life. Let me point out two of them. First, the church is summoned by Christ to put his kingdom ministry into practice in the world. The church’s task is to offer signs of God’s new creation by acting as an agent of God’s new world to our wounded and violent world. These signs come from living out the values of God’s future world such as compassion, forgiveness, love, and peacemaking. It will involve caring for the victims of our world, working to lead people out of the exile of poverty, injustice, and violence, and fostering communal and institutional settings where people can experience the renewal offered by Christ.

Second, the Christian life will involve struggle and opposition since it is lived out between the events of Easter and the Second Coming. Christ has risen and the Spirit has been given, but the antihuman forces are still at work in the world. We are under the influence of Christ and the infection of sin. Both these influences are at work outside the church, within the church, and within each Christian. The Christian life will always be a struggle between seductive ways of the world and
the new life Christ calls us to embrace. Christians will experience opposition to Christ’s call from the world around them, from those in the church, and from themselves! In the face of these struggles, our Christian worldview reminds us that the risen Lord accompanies us and is laboring to free us and our world (Dunn, 461–87). “Where sin abounds grace abounds even more” (Rom 5:20).

Refunding the Imagination

I have been setting out the biblical foundations for some of the important features of the Christian worldview in an effort to refund the Christian imagination. It is crucial that we allow the depth and power of our story to ignite our imaginations by seeing ourselves as participants in this story. In this way we discover anew the love of God the creator; recognize in a critical fashion the destructive forces in our world, and turn to Christ as the source of God’s new creation. The Christian worldview moves from God creating the world to Christ and the Spirit healing and renewing humanity and all creation. We are invited by Christ to locate our lives within this movement. In doing so our lives will take on a meaning and power unlike any other the world can offer.

References


